

THE TOWN MEETING -

A Down Home Approach

Hallie Coppedge

Since the campaign of 1828, when Andrew Jackson ran for President, the appeal to the common man has been a popular tactic for Presidential candidates. In 1976, Jimmy Carter ran for President, proclaiming himself to be just a backwoods peanut farmer from Georgia. The image proved beneficial to the candidate who went on to become the 39th President of the United States.

Four years later, Jimmy Carter became an international figure and not surprisingly, the down home country image got lost beneath a cavalcade of unexpected crises. It was as if a country woke up to find that the southern accent and the informal hospitality were not the remedies for their problems. So in 1980, it was not surprising that Americans were more likely to judge the President on his record rather than his heritage. But on October 9th, 1980, when Jimmy Carter paid a visit to Tennessee, it was apparent that this strategy was still thought suitable for acquiring the southern vote.

Carter was at home in Tennessee as he bounded upon the stage at the Grand Ole Opry. In the background there was a large figure of a guitar suspended in the air and a sign saying, "Welcome President Carter." The band of Bill Monroe played bluegrass tunes that may not have been

the primary favorite of metro Nashvillians, but was fundamentally helpful for setting the mood. It seemed to all to be an attempt to get Tennessee to rally around our southern president. Sitting in the audience, as this writer was, getting caught up in the awe of actually seeing the President, it was easy for one to want to rally around this plain man who was "just like us."

The first sentence with which Carter began his speech was, "It is really good to be back home." After that, a roar of applause filled the auditorium. His opening remarks were typical of a candidate trying to appeal to an area that he was from. The South, in particular, is an area of the country that has thrived on emotional events. Whether it be the revivalist preacher preaching about the salvation of man or the highly explosive civil rights issue, characteristics of southern heritage are powerfully passionate. Jimmy Carter, using his soft southern accent, hoped to raise from the Tennessee audience enough emotion to support their southern boy in 1980.

The first part of President Carter's speech was filled with sentimental expressions of how good it was to be back home. He stated that the real reason he came was to listen to Bill Monroe who had played on the White House lawn earlier. Carter reflected about his boyhood and the dreams he had had. As a young farm boy who grew up on bluegrass music, he had ambitions to become President and stand on

the stage at the Grand Ole Opry. After this explanation, Carter made the joke that he never knew he would have to be President before he could stand on the stage. Whether or not Jimmy Carter really had these dreams is debatable. But pointing out that he was born and bred in the heart of the South and that this honest, hardworking background probably led him to have honest, hardworking goals, he provided the audience with a chance to reminisce about the romanticized fairness of a democracy which allows every man the right to become whatever he wants, even if he is from the humblest background. Carter then began to bolster Tennesseans' pride by mentioning the three Presidents that came from the state: Johnson, Jackson, and Polk. Jackson was fondly remembered for planting magnolia trees (a southern favorite) around the White House. Johnson was merely mentioned as one who had trouble with the Republicans. And then Carter reminded the audience that Polk was remembered by the press in 1976 as the last President from the South. This of course was also a reminder to southerners that Jimmy Carter was their official representative who brought recognition back to the South. The rest of his speech dealt with defense, something that is not likely to be linked with southern heritage. But Carter managed to link Johnson, Jackson, and Polk's names at the end of the speech as Presidents who like himself were concerned over defense.

This appeal to the South as the roots and the backbone of American integrity was similar to a speech Carter made during his 1976 campaign in Arkansas. The first line of that speech was, "It's good to be back in Arkansas." Carter reflected then about the last southern President elected to the White House and mentioned a visit he made to another southern state, Alabama. He told how he was the first Democratic nominee to ever come to Alabama to campaign. This was probably very helpful to him in 1976 because it proved that being a southern Democrat he was glad to come down home. His Arkansas speech spoke of living up to "what the people of our region have represented." He then went on to explain the jobs of various representatives of Arkansas who fulfilled actions that were integral for the advancement of the South. One was helping the rural areas, which "helps us throughout the South." Another was a congressman who was going to "carry on the great southern tradition," whatever that is. Then Carter went on to claim how proud he was to be a Democrat and a southerner. So the idea to jump on the southern bandwagon was one that really pulled Jimmy forward in 1976. Unfortunately, 1980 proved his tactics to be much weaker.

Nonetheless, the Town Meeting was an example of an extraordinarily relaxed confrontation between one man and 2000 other people. It was as comfortable as the

Fireside Chats. Carter answered with genuine interest the questions that were presented to him by members of the audience.

A question concerning his plans if he failed to be re-elected led Carter down memory lane once again. He spoke of his Georgian ancestors and the simple life in Plains, Georgia. Shortly thereafter, a question concerning the consolidation of schools presented Carter with the opportunity to paint a picture of his country schoolhouse that had a graduating class of 23. He successfully let it be known that he was in favor of any helpful progress that could be provided by consolidation, yet elaborated about the immeasurable worth of small country schools.

One of the most effective means in which Carter came across as a "common neighbor" was the way in which he addressed his questioners by their first names. From watching the Town Meeting on television, one could see that he was writing their names down after they introduced themselves. But as I sat in the Town Meeting audience I did not notice that Carter was doing this, so the first-name references were just another extra that promoted the feeling of informality and southern hospitality.

Judging from the election returns, one might conclude that Carter's attempt to rekindle the flame of southern patriotism failed in 1980. Perhaps it did, mainly because

it was overshadowed by a conservative stronghold that is also very much a part of the South's heritage. The Town Meeting, however, was an excellent example of a candidate utilizing his appropriate characteristics to communicate with a certain region of the country.

NOTES

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THE CARTER CAMPAIGN IN
TENNESSEE 1980

Mike Williams

Jimmy Carter was President of the United States, and was running for re-election on the Democratic ticket in the 1980 Presidential election. Four years earlier, Carter had captured an overwhelming majority in Tennessee and defeated Republican President Gerald R. Ford by 200,000 votes. In 1976 the fourth congressional district in Tennessee gave Carter the largest majority of any congressional district in the country.

Yet, on November 4, 1980, Jimmy Carter was defeated in his try for Tennessee's 10 electoral votes and in his bid for a second term in the White House, by Republican nominee Ronald Reagan.

President Carter was defeated by only 5,576 votes; however, such an overwhelming victory in 1976 should not have turned into defeat in 1980, especially in a state which the Democratic National Committee had targeted to win, no matter how small the margin.

At first glance, there appears to have been a complete and total breakdown of the Democratic Machine, which for so many years had controlled Tennessee State Politics. This however, could not have been the case. For even with a Republican Governor and a well financed and concentrated effort to wrench control of the state legislature from the Democratic Party, the Republicans were able to gain only